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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *ECCLESIA IN ASIA* AND ITS IMPACT ON CONTEMPORARY ASIAN THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

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Abstract. The recent 25th anniversary of *Ecclesia in Asia* last November 6, 2024 underscores the need for a critical evaluation of its impact and relevance, hence the timeliness and necessity of this article. This article begins with the observation that *Ecclesia in Asia* primarily reflects the papal perspective rather than a genuine dialogue with Asian Churches, contrary to John Paul II's assertion that the document is the fruit of his "encounter in dialogue" with Asian bishops. Additionally, it highlights the document's neglect of crucial issues raised by the 1998 Synod of Bishops for Asia, especially the salvific significance of other religions, despite the FABC's long-standing commitment to their role in God's plan of salvation. Moreover, it criticizes the document's limited scope, which fails to recognize that the diverse cultural, religious, and social contexts of Asian Churches necessitate a variety of theological and pastoral approaches, as well as a unique vision of Asian Christianity adapted to local needs. In conclusion, it examines the specific methodologies of evangelization employed by Asian Churches, arguing that the question is never about the "who" and the "what" but always about the "how" of the local Churches' evangelizing mission in the continent.

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I. Introduction

The Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Asia, convoked by Pope John Paul II from April 18 to May 14, 1998 in Rome, which culminated in the publication of the landmark Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, was one of the five continental Synods summoned by the Holy Father as the Catholic Church prepared for the Great Jubilee at the turn of the third millennium (cf. *EA* 2, 3).[1] In this Synod, considered, "[i]n addition to the FABC," as "perhaps the major landmark in the history of Asian Catholicism's reception of Vatican II,"[2] and universally hailed in fact as having "marked the coming of age of the Asian Churches,"[3] the Churches of Asia were recognized as having "made great contributions in the field of a theology of religions for the whole Church."[4] The Pope himself acknowledged quite profusely in the Introduction of *Ecclesia in Asia* (cf. *EA* 2, 3, and 4), not just the Asian Churches' labors for the growth of "the Asian roots of Christianity" (*EA* 4) in the continent, but also their indispensable contribution to universal reflection on the question of the theology of religions.

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[1] *Ecclesia in Asia* was issued by Pope John Paul II on November 6, 1999, in New Delhi, India. Its 25th anniversary was commemorated by the Catholic Church on November 6, 2024. Hence, a critical examination of this document, which this article aims at, is timely and necessary.

[2] Peter C. Phan, "Reception of and Trajectories for Vatican II," in *50 Years On. Probing the Riches of Vatican II,* ed. D. Schultenover (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 306.

[3] Peter C. Phan, "Preface," in *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), xi.

[4] G. Evers, "The Specific Contribution of Asian Theologians towards a Theology of Religions," in *Reaping a Harvest from the Asian Soil. Towards an Asian Theology*, ed. V. Tirimanna (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2011), 80.

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While it is true that *Ecclesia in Asia*, the same as the rest of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortations of other continents, is addressed by the Holy Father to the whole Church, it is nevertheless primarily directed to Asian Churches whose concrete situations, theological questions, and pastoral needs the Synod must have reflected upon. *Ecclesia in Asia* is *for* and should be *about* the Churches of Asia. As "the Magna Carta for the evangelization of Asia in the Third Millennium,"[5] it is an Apostolic Exhortation that was supposed to have dealt with the situations of Asia and how the Churches of Asia could and must respond to the missiological issues and pastoral challenges of the continent. In fact, in the document, the Pope declares that the actual convocation of the Asian Synod was an "encounter in dialogue of the Bishops and the Successor of Peter" (*EA* 3), and that through the document, he wishes "to share with the Church in Asia and throughout the world the fruits of the Special Assembly" (*EA* 4). After acknowledging that the Asian situations were "examined in detail during the Synod by those who have daily contact with the extremely diversified realities of such an immense continent," which can only refer to the Asian bishops and theologians present in the Synod, the Pope asserts that the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation itself "is, in synthesis, the result of the Synod Fathers' reflections" (*EA* 5).

Yet, among some theologians, there is a sense that *Ecclesia in Asia* is an "unfinished business" because of their observation that the "voice" that we find in the document corresponds only to the "voice" of the Pope but not also to the "voices" of the Asian bishop-participants and the questions, issues and concerns that they brought to the Asian Synod.[6] In his Preface to *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries*, Peter Phan observes: "Several of these theologians have pointed out that the

[5] Cited by E. Chia, "Of Fork and Spoon or Fingers and Chopsticks: Interreligious Dialogue in *Ecclesia in Asia*," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 37:3 (2000): 243.

[6] Cf. Phan, "Preface," x. Cf. J. Prior, "Unfinished Encounter: A Note on the Voice and Tone of *Ecclesia in Asia*," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 37:3 (2000): 256-271; Chia, "Of Fork and Spoon," 242-255; Phan, "*Ecclesia in Asia*: Challenges for Asian Christianity," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 37:3 (2000): 215-232.

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voices of the Asian bishops who spoke at the synod and their concerns are not the same as those of the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* that purports [precisely] 'to share with the Church in Asia and throughout the world the fruits of the Special Assembly' (*EA* 4)."[7] For Edmund Chia, that the Synod for Asia truly became an "encounter in dialogue" between the Asian bishops and the Pope and that therefore the document, *Ecclesia in Asia*, can be considered "fruits" of such a fraternal dialogue is only "from the Pope's point of view" and is not shared by the Asian bishops.[8] John Prior, the liaison with the English-speaking press covering the Synod for Asia, in an article whose very title itself suggests that the Synod was an "unfinished encounter" between the Pope and the Asian bishops, concludes that *Ecclesia in Asia* is "a papal document," meaning, that it is "the Pope's response to the voice of the Asian Bishops"—which constitutes just "one side of the synodal encounter"[9]—rather than, as Chia expects, "the voice of the Pope in *dialogue* with the voice of the bishops of Asia."[10] For Michael Amaladoss, *Ecclesia in Asia* is "a document for Asia... [and]... not an Asian document"; "[i]t is not the voice of Asia... [for]... [t]he tone and style are very un-Asian."[11]

This paper will inquire whether these observations have a basis by examining *Ecclesia in Asia* and the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences vis-à-vis the question of how the Asian Churches should carry out their evangelizing mission in Asia. We will analyze especially the character and tone of *Ecclesia in Asia* and compare it with the Final Statement of the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly convened on January 3-12, 2000 and "regarded as the first

[7] Phan, "Preface," x.

[8] Chia, "Of Fork and Spoon," 244.

[9] Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 257-258.

[10] Chia, "Of Fork and Spoon," 244; emphasis mine.

[11] M. Amaladoss, "*Ecclesia in Asia* Affirms Tradition," *Asia Focus* 15:44 (November 26, 1999): 3.

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Asian Churches' response to *Ecclesia in Asia*."[12] Given the FABC's longstanding recognition of the salvific value of other religions, we will briefly examine the document's lack of explicit affirmation on this point. Moreover, we will examine the document's omission of Proposition 4 from the *Propositiones*, a Proposition that highlights the diversity of ecclesial contexts in Asia. Finally, we will consider the reality that in Asian Christianity, the question is never about the "who" and the "what" but always about the "how" of the local Churches' evangelizing mission in the continent.

II. The "Unfinished" Character of *Ecclesia in Asia* Vis-à-vis the Asian Churches' Theology of Religions

A. The Character and Tone of *Ecclesia in Asia*: Interpreting the Document's "Voice" Contextually

First, we examine the "sources" of *Ecclesia in Asia* by looking at its "footnotes." By providing references, "footnotes" are extremely important not only because they show *who* and *what* ideas influence the author in the formation of his insights and the development of his discourse but also because of the support they normally provide to claims and assertions made by the author in the text. In his brief discussion of the "sources" of the document, Prior, in his article, "Unfinished Encounter: A Note on the Voice and Tone of *Ecclesia in Asia*," observes that out of 240 footnotes, "[s]ome 145 of them, or 60.4%, refer to documents from the Synod of Asia" which include the *Lineamenta* (cited three times), the *Instrumentum Laboris* (cited twice), the *Nuntius* (cited once), the *Relatio Ante Disceptationem* (cited seven times), the *Relatio Post Disceptationem* (cited thirteen times), and the *Propositiones* (cited 119 times, or 49.6% of all the footnotes).[13] For Prior, all these citations came from synodal documents, which "were all drawn up by committees appointed by the Vatican."[14] John Paul II, according to Prior, "quotes himself 68 times" from his various Encyclicals,

[13] Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 256.

[14] Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 256.

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Apostolic Exhortations, Apostolic Letters, and Papal Addresses, which constitute 28.3% of the document's footnotes.[15] The rest of the 11.3% footnotes came from other sources: Paul VI (cited five times), Leo XIII (cited once), St. Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* (cited once), St. John Chrysostom's *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew* (cited once), the Roman Missal (cited twice), the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (cited twice), the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith (cited once), and the Second Vatican Council (cited fifteen times).

It is true that the Pope initially acknowledges the work and contribution of the FABC in the document when he affirms in the Introduction that "[e]arlier meetings of Asian Bishops had contributed to preparing the Synod and making possible an atmosphere of intense ecclesial and fraternal communion... [particularly]... the past Plenary Assemblies and Seminars sponsored by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences and its offices" (*EA* 3). Yet, in truth,

> [i]n *Ecclesia in Asia* there is not a single direct reference to any intervention by an individual bishop, nor to interventions by bishops in the name of their conferences. *There are no direct references to regional episcopal bodies such as the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)* or the Council of Oriental Catholic Patriarchs (CPCO).[16]

While it is true that the *Propositiones* were quoted 119 times (49.6%), Prior and Chia suggest that this document cannot be considered the "voice" of the Asian bishops because as a document that "needed to be kept secret," there is no way to verify "the disparity between the draft proposals from the bishops' groups and the resultant recommendations" made by a committee appointed by the Vatican.[17] Prior explains:

> While the *Lineamenta*, *Instrumentum Laboris* and *Nuntius* have been circulated in ecclesial circles, the major source—the *Elenchus Finalis Propositionum*—is *sub secreto*. Only participating bishops received a copy

[15] Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 256.

[16] Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 257; emphasis mine.

[17] Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 257; Chia, "Of Fork and Spoon," 244.

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> which they duly voted on, recommendation by recommendation. The booklet was then handed back to the Synodical Secretariat. Nobody outside Rome has a way of checking this source.[18]

For Prior, to hear the "voices" of the Asian bishop-participants, one must go back to the 191 interventions made during the first seven days of the Asian Synod. And out of these 191 interventions, 76.3 %[19] of them can be clustered around four main themes: the need for Asian Churches to engage in dialogue with other religious traditions (22.5%); the need for Churches in the continent to become authentically Asian through their ongoing dialogue with various cultures (21.4%); the need for Asian Churches to dialogue with the poor in the context of the continent's massive poverty (17.2%); and the need for the Asian Churches to become truly Churches of the laity (15.2%).[20] The first three themes have to do with the triple dialogue with cultures, religions, and the poor, which have been the predominant concerns of Asian bishops and theologians since the First FABC Plenary Assembly in 1974. Together with the Asian Church's desire to be a Church of the laity, these three interrelated ecclesiological concerns have been the FABC's preoccupations for the last 30 years. Yet, even the effort to return to the Asian bishops' interventions during the first week of the Synod is not an easy task because "[p]articipating bishops received only a brief summary of their interventions, not the complete text," which, like the *Propositiones*, is "the property of the Synodical secretariat."[21]

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[18] Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 256-257.

[19] To understand why the Asian bishops' interventions constituted only 76.3% of the total number of interventions, we must remember that the interventions during these first seven days of the Synod came not only from the bishops of Asia but also from curial officials and auditors (Cf. Tagle, "The Synod for Asia as Event," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 35 [1998] 3 & 4, 368). This means that the interventions of the curial officials and auditors comprised 23.70% of the total interventions in the Synod. The "report" that highlighted the concerns raised by the bishops, curial officials, and the auditors was called the *Relatio Post Disceptationem*.

[20] Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 258-259.

[21] Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 257.

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And even if one could go back to these interventions, the fact is that, as shown in the "footnotes" of *Ecclesia in Asia*, the interventions of the Asian bishops, *together* with those of curial officials and of the auditors, which eventually became the *Relatio Post Disceptationem*, were cited *only* thirteen times by the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation.

Indeed, it is a tragedy for a papal document that purports to offer a manual for the Churches' evangelization in Asia not to have incorporated the insights and ideas of the FABC, considering that the Asian bishops had not brought anything new to the Asian Synod's discussions and deliberations, which they had not previously reflected upon for the last 30 years. *Ecclesia in Asia* has not utilized what should have been the main source of its theological reflections and insights in a document that proposes to help Asian Churches enter into a new millennium of their evangelizing presence in the continent—the collective reflections of Asian bishops, priests, religious, lay, and theologians in the FABC documents.

For Luis Antonio Tagle, when examining what the Asian bishops in the Synod of Bishops for Asia had brought to the attention of the universal Church gathered in the Synod, we can say that compared with the FABC's previous statements and considerations since its inception in 1972, there was nothing new in what the Asian bishops individually and as a group articulated during the Synod. After identifying the fifteen points of agreement out of the total fifty-nine (or sixty-one) points that the Synod for Asia submitted to Pope John Paul II, Tagle asserts that "[t]here's nothing new here" when the Propositions are seen in comparison with the FABC teachings through the years, "except maybe the reaffirmation of these things."[22] Phan echoes this observation. To the question that he himself asks and answers—"Has the Exhortation said anything new and important for the Churches of Asia that either had not been said before by these Churches themselves or could not have been said except thanks to the work of the Synod itself?"—"the answer is frankly no."[23] For Phan, among the seven thematic sections

[22] Tagle, "The Synod for Asia as Event," 371.

[23] Phan, "*Ecclesia in Asia*: Challenges for Asian Christianity," 217.

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of *Ecclesia in Asia*, excluding the introductory section on the Asian context, "what the Exhortation says on the other six themes has already been said, powerfully and in great detail, by the various documents of the FABC."[24]

Yet, for Tagle, if the Synod of Bishops was truly an event, it was because of "the birth of something new" in the Synod: "[T]hese concerns were elevated from the level of the FABC and the National Episcopal Conference to that of the Universal Church."[25] Tagle adds that "[i]f they become part of the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II, they will not only be addressed to the Church of Asia but the Universal Church."[26] In commenting on Tagle's observation, Phan affirms that the new thing about the Synod for Asia was not what the Asian bishops said but *how* they said it and that they said it to the whole Church gathered at the Synod:

> What they said had been said, at length and with power and depth, for almost thirty years, ever since the founding of the FABC in 1972, in its numerous plenary assemblies and in the documents of its several institutes. But at the Synod, they said it again, *to the whole Church*, and with surpassing *boldness* and refreshing *candor*, with what the New Testament calls *parrhésia*[27].

If *Ecclesia in Asia* does not live up to its intended image as an "encounter in dialogue" between the Pope and the Asian bishops because it is largely the "Pope's voice" and not really a "dialogue," how then do we discover the voice of the bishops "at the other end

[24] Phan, "*Ecclesia in Asia*: Challenges for Asian Christianity," 217. Referring to the *Elenchus Finalis Propositionem* of the 1998 Synod of Bishops for Asia which "were accepted by the bishops with virtual unanimity," Prior remarks: "Most could have been written 30 years ago" (Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 257).

[25] Tagle, "The Synod for Asia as Event," 371.

[26] Tagle, "The Synod for Asia as Event," 371; ID., "The Challenges of Mission in Asia: A View from the Asian Synod," in *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries*, ed., Peter C. Phan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 219-220; cf. Phan, "*Ecclesia in Asia*: Challenges for Asian Christianity," 217.

[27] Phan, "*Ecclesia in Asia*: Challenges for Asian Christianity," 217.

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of the line," at the other "end of the telephone conversation," to use Prior's expressions?[28] According to Prior, "[f]or the voice of the Asian Bishops we have to look elsewhere."[29] For Chia, "to listen to the other end of the conversation," we need to turn to "none other than Asia itself," listening not only to "the voice of the bishops of Asia but also [to] the voice of theologians and others who work and live in Asia."[30] This means re-visiting the Asian Churches' thoughts and insights as contained in the FABC documents and in the reflections of Asian bishops and theologians who theologized within the context of Asia for the last thirty years.

For Chia, in our quest for this Asian "voice," we need to listen specifically to the voice of the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly held less than two months after the New Delhi proclamation of *Ecclesia in Asia*. Its Final Statement is considered "the actual voice of the bishops of Asia and not one which went through the filter of the Pope, as is *Ecclesia in Asia*," in which "one gets to hear the other side of the telephone line."[31] Taking both *Ecclesia in Asia* and FABC VII's document together will facilitate our deeper understanding of the "encounter in dialogue" between the Pope and the Asian bishops that was supposed to have taken place during the Synod,[32] or, to put a completion to what Chia calls an "unfinished business," or to what Prior labels as an "unfinished encounter."[33] Indeed, because *Ecclesia in Asia* provides us with the voice of the Pope while the FABC's and the Synod's interventions offer us the voices of the bishops of Asia,

[28] Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 258.

[29] Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 258.

[30] Chia, "Of Fork and Spoon," 245.

[31] Chia, "Of Fork and Spoon," 249.

[32] Chia, "Of Fork and Spoon," 249.

[33] Chia, "The 'Absence of Jesus' in the VII FABC Plenary Assembly," *VJTR* 63 (1999) 892; Cf. Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 256-271.

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these two voices need to be unified to achieve a genuine "encounter in dialogue" between the Pope and the Asian bishops.[34]

Looking at the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly, we observe that while its Final Statement cites *Ecclesia in Asia* about fifteen times, "it also quotes quite lavishly from other FABC documents, which *Ecclesia in Asia* does not," making the Assembly Statement "certainly more Asian than is *Ecclesia in Asia*," and it "is [thus] more representative of Asian views."[35] While the core ideas of the Asian bishops, as articulated in the Synod for Asia and FABC VII, have remained consistent, nevertheless their understanding and expression of these ideas have deepened over time as the bishops "keep searching for the deeper challenges of renewal—its meaning and scope in our life and mission in Asia."[36] The statement of FABC VII was significant not so much for the fresh and original themes it tackled, which were minimal, but for the strong resolve of the Asian bishops to continue on the ecclesial path the FABC had been taking for many years.[37]

As a matter of fact, for FABC VII, the eight movements that constitute an Asian vision of a renewed Church have been "a concerted series of movements towards a renewed Church... [in]... [t]he thirty-year history of the FABC."[38] That these eight movements have been "the vision of a renewed Church that the FABC has developed over the past thirty years," a vision which the bishops of Asia claim to be "still valid today," is evident when we look at where the earliest articulations of these movements originated—from the previous assemblies of the Asian bishops for the past thirty years since their first historic meeting

[34] Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 266.

[35] Chia, "Of Fork and Spoon," 249.

[36] FABC VII, in FAPA III, 4.

[37] T. C. Fox, "True to their Mission, Polite toward Rome," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 37:3 (2000): 288.

[38] FABC VII, in FAPA III, 3.

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in Manila, Philippines in 1970.[39] Even just a cursory inspection of these eight movements reveals right away the assembly's sense of continuity with, and its indebtedness to, those assemblies that came before it. Indeed, while "[t]he Asian bishops cited *Ecclesia in Asia* in their final draft document," they did so "but only when it suited their purposes."[40]

B. The Absence of An Explicit Recognition of the Salvific Character of Other Religions in *Ecclesia in Asia*

Secondly, we observe the puzzling omission of an explicit affirmation of the salvific significance of other religions in *Ecclesia in Asia*, notwithstanding the robust advocacy for this principle by Asian bishops and theologians in the 1998 Synod for Asia. According to Phan, "[w]ith regard to interreligious dialogue, many Asian episcopal conferences call for not only a respectful dialogue with non-Christians, but also an explicit recognition of the salvific value of non-Christian religions, not as independent from or parallel to Christ, but in relation to him."[41] On the part of the Indian bishops, they argue that the preaching of the living memory of Christ to the Asian peoples must be in ways that are respectful of their histories and traditions. This suggests that while "[t]he language of the Church's proclamation must be clear… it may not be such that it seems to deny the authentic action of God in other cultures and religions," and that while "Christ is indeed the source and cause of all salvation for all peoples… this fact does not exclude the possibility of God mysteriously employing other cooperating channels, as John Paul II allows,"[42] referring to *Redemptoris Missio*, 5. Hence, while they affirm the uniqueness and universality of Christ's saving mediation, understood in terms of Christ as the sacrament, as "the definitive symbol of God's salvation for all humanity," such a Christian conviction "does not mean that there cannot be other symbols, valid in their own ways, which the Christian sees as related to the definitive symbol, Jesus Christ."[43] They conclude: "[F]or hundreds of millions

[39] FABC VII, in FAPA III, 3-4.

[40] Fox, "True to their Mission, Polite toward Rome," 287.

[43] Cited by Phan, "Responses of Asian Episcopal Conferences," 22.

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of our fellow human beings, salvation is seen as being channeled to them not in spite of but through and in their various sociocultural and religious traditions. We cannot, therefore, deny a priori a salvific role for these non-Christian religions."[44] Similarly, after arguing for the need to re-examine the significance and role of traditional religions in Korea, the Korean bishops affirm that "[t]hey [their religions] too play a part in the salvific economy of God," an "understanding [that] is essential for the inculturation of the Gospel."[45] For the Filipino bishops, "[w]hile firmly and courageously confessing the truth, any treatment of the uniqueness of Jesus should avoid any triumphalism and superior attitude vis-à-vis the other great religions of Asia."[46]

Even if the Asian Churches' call for this unequivocal acknowledgment of the salvific status of the other Asian religions was made in 1998 as they responded to the Synod's *Lineamenta*, it must be noted, as Tagle argues, that it was not the first time that the Asian bishops and theologians had put forward this argument. It has been a consistent assertion of the Asian Churches in the FABC assemblies, conferences, and workshops since 1974.[47] If Vatican II has argued that salvation is available to every human being, although in ways known to God alone (cf. *LG* 16, *AG* 7, and *GS* 22), for Asian bishops and theologians, it is in and through the religious traditions of the world that God's saving grace reaches adherents of other faiths. Ruben C. Mendoza, in his article, "Religious Pluralism and Turn to the Spirit," sums up the FABC's reasoning in this way:

> The FABC firmly believes in the universal salvific will of God, a grace that is freely offered to every person, including peoples of other faiths. At the same time, it recognizes the existential reality that many peoples of other faiths who come into contact with Jesus Christ and the Church in Asia do not become Christians but remain in their own traditions to which they adhere devoutly. For the FABC this situation is not merely

[44] Cited by Phan, "Responses of Asian Episcopal Conferences," 22.

[45] Phan, "Responses of Asian Episcopal Conferences," 32.

[46] Phan, "Responses of Asian Episcopal Conferences," 40.

[47] Tagle, "The Synod for Asia as Event," 370-371.

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> a sociological reality but is indicative of God's plan for these believers, a reflection of the mysterious and unfathomable grace of salvation. While the FABC does not specify the means that God gives to every person for her or his redemption, it seems that a concrete way in which other believers do participate in God's life is through their own religious traditions. In other words, other religious traditions have salvific value.[48]

Yet, *Ecclesia in Asia* does not include any statement that recognizes *explicitly* the role of other religions in the salvation of their members. Indeed, in spite of the Asian bishops' and theologians' calling for the explicit recognition of the salvific value of non-Christian religions in Asia, *Ecclesia in Asia* does not take up the issue and is silent about it. Such a non-recognition of the saving import of other religions contributes to the derailment of interreligious dialogue and the situation of *impasse* in Asia because of its tremendous impact on the character and structure of "dialogue" between Christians and adherents of other religions.[49]

C. The Absence of Reference to "Proposition 4" on the Diversity of Asian Ecclesial Contexts in *Ecclesia in Asia*

Thirdly, we analyze a significant recommendation from the *Propositiones* that was omitted from *Ecclesia in Asia*, which, for the Asian bishops, is a crucial Synodal Proposition as it seriously speaks of the varied and diverse contexts and situations of the Churches of Asia. Proposition 4—the proposition in question—argues:

> There is a rich variety of Churches by reason of origin, rite, and establishment. The communion of the Church in Asia is a unity in diversity. All these Churches live under different cultural, social, religious, and political contexts with all their related problems, difficulties, restrictions, and even persecution. They are faced with different

[48] R. C. Mendoza, "Religious Pluralism and Turn to the Spirit: FABC's and Gavin D'Costa's Theology of Religions," *Journal of Dharma* 35:1 (2010): 26.

[49] Cf. A. Mong, *Dialogue Derailed: Joseph Ratzinger's War Against Pluralist Theology*, Eugene (OR) 2015; F. Wilfred, "Dialogue Gasping for Breath? Towards New Frontiers in Inter-Religious Dialogue," *Vidyajyoti* (1987): 449-466.

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situations in their life and witness.[50]

By establishing the contexts and ecclesial realities of Asia, this Proposition acknowledges that the Asian Churches are indeed as varied and diverse as the immense world of Asia itself "by reason of origin, rite and establishment." This is the reason why we cannot speak of *Church of Asia* (or Asian Church) but of *Churches of Asia* (or Asian Churches). What the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation fails to recognize and tries to "bury" in the grave of oblivion, the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly affirms and "resuscitates" in its document: "The local churches in Asia present a splendid variety in their origin, historical, socio-political and cultural situations, ecclesial identity and growth. Obviously, the pastoral challenges facing the Church in Asia are equally diverse."[51]

In Asia, owing to its immensely complex socio-cultural, economic, political, and religious situations characterized by overwhelming diversities and pluralisms, it is extremely difficult to come up with accurate observations that are true and applicable to all, if not to many, Asian countries[52]. Because the Asian Churches live under extremely divergent circumstances with all their attendant theological issues and concerns and are confronted with distinct pastoral problems and challenges in their life and mission, Proposition 4 argues that "[o] pportunities for and methods of evangelization vary from country to country. Hence no uniform pattern of proclamation, inculturation, or dialogue is applicable to all the Churches in Asia."[53]

However, in spite of the obviousness of what Proposition 4 holds—which is simply "the pluriform nature of Asian Churches"—it is sadly, according to Prior, "one of the eight recommendations

[50] Synod of Bishops for Asia, "The Synod's Propositions," in *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries*, ed., Phan, 142.

[51] FABC VII, in FAPA III, 8.

[52] FABC-OE, no. 2, in FAPA I, 335.

[53] Synod of Bishops for Asia, "The Synod's Propositions," 142.

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nowhere referred to in *Ecclesia in Asia*."[54] The recognition of this bewildering diversity of contexts and situations confronting the various Churches of Asia logically demands the acceptance of distinct manners of evangelization, of doing theology, and of proclaiming Christ in Asia. As the Indian bishops assert in their response to the *Lineamenta*: "[A] common methodology and faith expression for preaching the Gospel to the Asian people cannot be formulated. Rather, each Asian country should develop by careful discernment its own methodologies according to its pastoral needs."[55] And if we stretch the implications of this argument, the conclusion is that the way Christ is preached in Europe, in Africa, or in Latin America will be different from the way Christ is preached not only in Asia as a whole but also in its many diverse places, countries, and regions. As Proposition 7, another important Proposition not included in the final document, admits, the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the only Savior of the world presents problems and difficulties in the context of Asia's plurality of religions, since their adherents also believe in the revelatory and salvific character of their own religions. Hence, this Proposition encourages Asian theologians "to pursue their work of developing an inculturated theology that responds to Asian realities," which is "to be carried out with courage, in faithfulness to the Scriptures and to the Church's tradition, in sincere adherence to the Magisterium."[56]

Indeed, if the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation does not recognize this multi-contextual character of the Churches of Asia, no wonder it insists on a kind and method of proclamation that seems almost the same throughout the world and seems nearly the same everywhere because it does not take into consideration the context of theologizing, of doing theology. It is oblivious to the truth that if "[t]heology is unavoidably contextual," and if "the context is not

[54] Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 260. The footnotes of *Ecclesia in Asia* reveal that the other seven Propositions not included in the document are Propositions 2, 7, 9, 10, 26, 37, and 46.

[55] Cited by Phan, "Responses of the Asian Episcopal Conferences," 22.

[56] Synod of Bishops for Asia, "The Synod's Propositions," 143, 142-143.

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simply the venue in which theology is done but provides resources for theology as well as the lens through which the Christian doctrines are interpreted,"[57] then *Ecclesia in Asia* must have employed the different sociopolitical, cultural, and religious contexts of Asia as sources of new and fresh theological insights for the Churches of Asia.[58] The document, "Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church," is right in warning us, then, that if the Churches of Asia do not discover their own identity and do not become Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, and communicating their experience of Christ to others, they will have no future.[59]

D. The Question of Asian Churches: Not the "Who" But the "How" in Their Evangelizing Mission in the Continent

Fourthly, we explore the implications of the Asian bishops' emphasis on contextual theology and its divergence from Rome's approaches to evangelization.

Let us develop this argument little by little. As regards the Christological content of *Ecclesia in Asia*, we need to recall the words of John Paul II that while "[t]he Synod was an occasion to recognize the ancient religious traditions and civilization, the profound philosophies and the wisdom which have made Asia what it is today (*EA* 4), the Pope nevertheless hoped that the Synod might, quoting his Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* 30, "illustrate and explain more fully the truth that Christ is the one Mediator between God and man and the sole Redeemer of the world, to be clearly distinguished from the founders of other great religions" (*EA* 2).

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[57] Peter C. Phan, *The Joy of Religious Pluralism: A Personal Journey* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 101.

[58] See Michael Amaladoss, "Asian Theological Trends," in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, ed. F. Wilfred (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 106–107, which partly discusses contextual theology, especially the contextual nature of Asian theology.

[59] FABC, no. 14, in FAPA I, 70.

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We can see this explicitly in Chapter 2 of *Ecclesia in Asia*, a chapter devoted to meditation on "Jesus the Savior: A Gift to Asia," which commences with the declaration that "Jesus Christ, true God and true man," is "the one and only Savior of all peoples" (*EA* 10). Amaladoss considers this faith-affirmation "a summary of the document's image of Jesus… [and]… a very clear statement of the Vatican's view on Jesus as the unique and therefore the universal mediator of salvation for all human beings."[60] All of the exhortation's teachings about Jesus are grounded in this central affirmation of faith: "In "the fullness of time" (*Gal* 4:4), he sent his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ the Savior, who took flesh as an Asian!" (*EA* 1); "'Behold the Savior of the World is born to us,' born in Asia!" (*EA* 2); "the Synod was an ardent affirmation of faith in Jesus Christ the Savior" (*EA* 4); "The Jesus whom we proclaim as the only Savior walked the earth as the God-Man" (*EA* 11). For the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, "[s]alvation can be found in the person of the Son of God made man and the mission entrusted to him alone as the Son, a mission of service and love for the life of all" (*EA* 13). Pope John Paul II, therefore, does not mince his words when, in a section specifically dealing with "the uniqueness and universality of salvation in Jesus," he boldly concludes Chapter 2's meditation on Jesus Christ as Savior in this way:

> We believe that Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is the one Savior because he alone—the Son—accomplished the Father's universal plan of salvation. As the definitive manifestation of the mystery of the Father's love for all, Jesus is indeed unique, and "it is precisely this uniqueness of Christ which gives him an absolute and universal significance, whereby, while belonging to history, he remains history's centre and goal" (*EA* 14).

For the Holy Father, the proclamation of Jesus Christ as such is "the Church's unique contribution to the peoples of the continent" (*EA* 10); it is, in fact, "the greatest gift which the Church can offer to Asia" (*EA* 10), "the supreme service which the Church can offer to

[60] M. Amaladoss, "The Image of Jesus in the *Church in Asia*," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 37:3 (2000): 233-234.

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the peoples of Asia" (20).[61] It is a gift received from God and a gift that must be shared with others: "Sharing the truth of Jesus Christ with others is the solemn duty of all who have received the gift of faith" (*EA* 10).

Because of John Paul II's manifestly strong Christological convictions in *Ecclesia in Asia*, we, therefore, find in the document expressions addressed to Asian Catholics like: "preaching... the saving Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ must be your absolute priority" (*EA* 2); "proclaim with vigor in word and deed that *Jesus Christ is the Savior*" (*EA* 9); "[t]he disciples of Jesus in Asia must... be unstinting in their efforts to fulfill the mission they have received from the Lord... [and must share]... with the multitude of Asia's peoples the immense gift which she herself has received—the love of Jesus the Savior" (*EA* 50). For the Apostolic Exhortation, the crucial issue in the "new evangelization" of the Asian continent, and that which constitutes the greatest concern of the Churches of Asia at the turn of the new millennium, is the proclamation of Jesus Christ. It is a concern that necessitates not just "an explicit, complete proclamation of Christ" but also "a correct formulation of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior."[62] The Holy Father opens *Ecclesia in Asia* with a fervent hope that—quoting his address delivered at the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly in Manila, Philippines in 1995— "just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted on the soil of Europe, and in the second on that of the Americas and Africa, we can pray that in the Third Christian Millennium a great harvest of faith will be reaped in this vast and vital continent" (*EA* 1).

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[61] This has been Vatican's insistence as early as in the *Lineamenta*, for the Synod for Asia to focus on the proclamation of Jesus, Savior of the world, as the Church's gift to the peoples of Asia. In fact, for Edmund Chia, the *Lineamenta* even suggested in an entire chapter entitled "'Jesus Christ: God's Good News of Salvation to all' that Jesus Christ is 'The Church's Gift to Asia' (Chap. IV), *as if the Church possessed Jesus or as if Jesus was given by some agent outside Asia to Asia*" (E. Chia, "The 'Absence of Jesus,'" 895; emphasis mine).

[62] Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 259.

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And, if *Ecclesia in Asia* is a manual for evangelization in Asia, the Pope looks at the Church's evangelizing mission in Asia as "a providential opportunity for the Church in Asia... to make a renewed commitment to the mission of making Jesus Christ better known to all" (*EA* 2), "the joyful, patient and progressive preaching of the saving Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ" (*EA* 2), the full illustration and explanation of "the truth that Christ is the one Mediator between God and man and the sole Redeemer of the world" (*EA* 2). Indeed, the Apostolic Exhortation "is a strong affirmation of the need for a new drive for evangelizing Asia and expresses a fervent hope that Asia will turn to Christ in the third millennium."[63] For *Ecclesia in Asia*, this thrust of the "new evangelization," in "the earth's largest continent… [which]… is home to nearly two-thirds of the world's population" (*EA* 6), is imperative. This is not only because "after two millennia, a major part of the human family does not acknowledge Christ" (*EA* 29), but also and particularly because Jesus Christ, "the Savior of the world, born in Asia, has until now remained largely unknown to the people of the continent" (*EA* 2). Indeed, as a result of a Synod that has for its purpose the rekindling of evangelization in Asia, "*Ecclesia in Asia* [simply] repeated [Pope John Paul II's] directive that Asian bishops evangelize primarily by proclaiming Christ as the unique savior of the world."[64]

Phan observes that during the preparatory phase of the Synod, the Asian bishops were never consulted about the theme—"Jesus Christ the Savior and his Mission of Love and Service in Asia"—which, for Cardinal Jan Schotte, the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops, was supposed to highlight "the centrality of the Person of Christ, his mission as Mediator and One and Only Savior in God's Eternal Plan of Salvation," thereby making "the Church in Asia and all Her members... better prepared to fulfill Christ's Evangelizing Mission of love and

[63] Amaladoss, "*Ecclesia in Asia* Affirms Tradition," 3.

[64] Fox, "True to their Mission, Polite toward Rome," 286.

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service in Asia."[65] Yet, for Phan, "[t]his imposition of Christology with its claim of Jesus as the 'mediator and one and only savior' on the Asian Synod's agenda and conceiving it as the panacea for what may ail the Asian churches constitute, to judge from all the documents of the FABC, a massive misdiagnosis of the situation of Asian Christianity."[66] On his part, Amaladoss expects that after having correctly said that "[t]he Synod Fathers noted that proclaiming Jesus as the only Savior can present particular difficulties in their cultures, given that many Asian religions teach divine self-manifestations as mediating salvation" (*EA* 10), *Ecclesia in Asia* "would take into account this reality and would reflect on its own faith affirmation in this new context."[67] Instead, in the Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Asia, "what we have is *an affirmation of faith that could have been made anywhere in the world at any time*, not only in what it says positively about Jesus and his significance, but also in what it says about other religions."[68] For the Indian bishops, it is actually "[a] deficiency of our present Christology… that it sometimes uses exclusive language, which deals with only one part of the great mystery of Christ—as though valid for all times and places."[69] For Amaladoss, in another article, this problem arises because Western theology "ignores its own contextual sources as irrelevant," because it claims that it is "independent of all context and so universally valid," and because "even when the Western theologians acknowledge that there is a context for their reflections, they claim it to be universal."[70]

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[65] Cited by Phan, "'Reception' or 'Subversion' of Vatican II by the Asian Churches?: A New Way of Being Church in Asia," in *Vatican II: Forty Years Later*, ed., W. Madges (Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 41.

[66] Phan, "'Reception' or 'Subversion' of Vatican II," 41.

[67] Amaladoss, "The Image of Jesus," 235.

[68] Amaladoss, "The Image of Jesus," 235; emphasis mine.

[69] Cited by Phan, "Responses of the Asian Episcopal Conferences," 21.

[70] Amaladoss, "The Mystery of Christ and Other Religions: An Indian Perspective," *VJTR*, 63 (1999): 327.

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Thomas Fox, who was present at the Seventh FABC General Assembly, expressed a similar sentiment: "Privately many bishops here expressed frustration with Rome's seeming inability to understand their 'Asian' mindset and the circumstances in which their churches operate."[71] In another article, Fox narrates that after addressing the participants at FABC VII on the first day of the gathering, Cardinal Josef Tomko—Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and Rome's representative in the Asian bishops' assembly—was asked by the bishops what he meant by "weak Christology" when he said (presumably in his address) that they should not allow such a Christology in Asia. In the words of Fox, Tomko "replied [that] a weak Christology would be one that portrayed Jesus as simply a wise person or prophet—but not the Son of God." When "[h]e was pressed to say if he had encountered such a Christology in their midst... [h]e replied he had not."[72] The Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly introduces its Final Statement with the Asian bishops' "dream of sharing our faith in Jesus... in Jesus through whom God saves;" it concludes with a quotation from *Ecclesia in Asia* expressing the same faith: "[T]he Church in Asia joyfully makes her pilgrim way into the Third Millennium. Her only joy is that which comes from sharing with the multitude of Asia's peoples the immense gift which she herself has received—the love of Jesus the Savior" (*EA* 50).[73]

Likewise, for Fox, such an approach to evangelization, with an over-emphasis on the proclamation of Jesus Christ without much consideration of the unique contexts and the difficult situations of the Asian Churches in the continent, is exactly what the Asian bishops were hesitant to embrace. While the bishops of Asia "did not openly reject the pope's exhortation," they nonetheless expressed "the need to evangelize by witnessing to the gospels and by entering into dialogue with followers of the other Asian religions."[74] John Paul II himself

[71] Fox, "True to their Mission, Polite toward Rome," 286.

[72] Fox, "True to their Mission, Polite toward Rome," 289.

[73] FABC VII, in FAPA III, 2.15.

[74] Fox, "True to their Mission, Polite toward Rome," 286.

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admits that the proclamation of Jesus in the Asian context is "fraught with philosophical, cultural and theological difficulties, especially in light of the beliefs of Asia's great religions, deeply intertwined with cultural values and specific world views," problems that are compounded by the fact that "Jesus is often perceived as foreign to Asia," regarded in fact as "a Western rather than an Asian figure" (*EA* 20). The Pope, therefore, proposes in the presentation of Jesus Christ as the only Savior a *gradual* "pedagogy" that introduces non-Christians to the full appropriation of his mystery, the use of different approaches in the initial and continuing proclamation of Jesus to religious others, and the use of narrative methods to complement ontological categories employed in the proclamation (*EA* 20).

This proposal of the Pope must have been the result of the insights of the "smaller discussion groups" into which the Asian bishops were divided after their initial speeches in the first week of the Asian Synod. Gerard O'Connell, who collated the insights of the small groups in his brief article, observed that some synodal bishops felt that "to present Jesus as the only savior 'immediately'… 'would not be prudent,'" and that "the uniqueness of Jesus, though theologically correct, may not be the best place to start"; they suggested that Jesus "should be presented [first] as a perfect human being" who is "'not distant' from Asian realities."[75] For the Asian bishops—something that they asserted so strongly in their responses to the *Lineamenta*—"dialogue with other religions comes first and that it is the means to effective proclamation."[76] In fact, for the Japanese bishops, "[i]f we stress too much that 'Jesus Christ is the One and Only Saviour,' we can have no dialogue, common living, or solidarity with other religions."[77] Indeed, if we start our evangelization by saying that only Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world and that others will not achieve salvation unless they become Christians, they will immediately close their doors to us and we will not be able to enter into any conversation with them.

[75] G. O'Connell, "Doing It the Asian Way," *The Tablet* (16 May 1998): 647.

[76] Cited by Chia, "The 'Absence of Jesus,'" 896.

[77] Cited by Chia, "Responses of the Asian Episcopal Conferences," 30.

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In the First Consensus Paper of the 1979 International Congress on Mission, entitled, "Towards a Theology of Mission for Asia Today," the participants declared that "[t]he primary task of the Church is to present effectively through personal witness, lifestyle, concern for others, commitment, joyful hope, the meaning of human existence as revealed in Jesus Christ."[78] Only when Asian Churches go through a serious process of renewal, proclaiming Jesus through life-witness, radical service to the poor, and living a life characterized by the primacy of God, can they become authentically Church and genuinely Asian—something that "comes out clearly in the work of the FABC over the past 30 years and is vindicated by the many synodical interventions."[79] The Asian bishops, in FABC VII, also declare that in the process of renewal—which involves all the Church's sectors, "[w]hat counts inestimably more is our ecclesial identity and the quality of our witness as servants and disciples of Jesus and the Kingdom of God for the peoples of Asia."[80] In fact, "[w]e could easily trace the source of many conversions to the living witness of genuine Christians, be they clerical or lay."[81] Our brothers and sisters of other faiths "will recognize the Gospel that we announce when they see in our life the transparency of the message of Jesus and the inspiring and healing figure of men and women immersed in God."[82] In their most unambiguous pronouncement on the preeminence of the component of witnessing as a mode of proclaiming Christ to Asians, the Asian bishops affirm: "The most effective means of evangelization and service in the name of Christ has always been and continues to be the witness of life," which "has to become the way of the Gospel for persons, institutions and the whole Church community."[83]

[78] International Congress on Mission, no. 15, in FAPA I, 138.

[79] Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 261-262.

[80] FABC VII, in FAPA III, 5.

[81] FABC VII, in FAPA III, 12.

[82] FABC VII, in FAPA III, 13.

[83] FABC VII, in FAPA III, 12-13.

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According to Chia, it is, therefore, in the manner of articulating the Asian vision of Christianity, and not in its content, that the Asian Churches depart from Rome, that "it is not so much the *who* or the *why* of mission that is in dispute as is the *how* of mission or the methodology for theological reflection."[84] Cardinal Paul Shan, bishop of Kaohsiung, Taiwan, expressed it more concretely: "[T]he big question presently confronting us, given the religious and cultural context of Asia, is not why we should proclaim the Good News of Christ's Salvation but HOW."[85]

In fact, as early as 1978, the First Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate held in the Philippines argued that, given "the legacy of millions still to be introduced to Christ," it "sought in faith for new ways of communicating the Good News."[86] In a 1988 All-Asian Conference on Evangelization held in South Korea, the participants strove "to search for fresh ways to announce and share the Good News of God's Kingdom in Jesus Christ with our Asian brothers and sisters."[87] Like the rest of the universal Church, the *who* and the *what* to proclaim to Asians has always been a "constant" for the Asian Churches—it is Jesus Christ and his Gospel. It is on the *how*, the manner of proclaiming Jesus Christ in Asia, that they differ because of the unique situations of religious pluralism in the continent. Asia requires a different way of doing theology because of its unique multi-religious context, a way of theologizing that inevitably gives birth to a distinct, contextualized theology. As Prior observes:

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[84] Chia, "Of Fork and Spoon," 242-243. A clarification is in order here. By "content" (a word that appears in Chia's statement referred to in this sentence), Chia *specifically* refers to the "who" and the "what" of evangelization—meaning, Jesus Christ and the Gospel, as we see in the ensuing discussion. This needs to be clarified because the Asian vision of Christianity *does* depart from Rome in content as regards its position that other religions are ways of salvation for their members.

[85] Cited by Chia, "Of Fork and Spoon," 242; word in capitals in the original.

[86] BIMA I, no. 4, in FAPA I, 94.

[87] BIMA I, no. 2, in FAPA I, 291.

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> Looking again at the 191 interventions, and remembering the informal conversations during the Synodal coffee breaks, I can say with absolute certainty that not a single Asian bishop would disagree with the *who* of mission, with the subject of proclamation. The faith we live is Christic, the ongoing practice of the Asian Churches is a faithful following of the Incarnate Word; on this the integrity of our mission is founded. The key issue that the bishops grapple with is the *how* of mission.[88]

Somewhat related to this fundamental difference between the Pope's *Ecclesia in Asia* and the Asian bishops' interventions both in the Asian Synod and in the FABC assemblies is the question of the "foreignness" of Christianity and the Churches in Asia. In the Apostolic Exhortation, the Pope "sees the crux of the matter as doctrinal (Christocentrism)," whereas, for the Asian bishops, the problem is not with Jesus Christ "but the presence of a foreign Church burdened by a colonial past."[89] *Ecclesia in Asia* should have explored the reasons why Jesus, born in Asia, "has until now remained largely unknown to the people of the continent" (*EA* 2)—reasons such as "the absence of an appropriate adaptation to local cultures, and perhaps above all a lack of preparedness to encounter the great religions of Asia" (*EA* 9). However, the document simply calls for "a renewed commitment to the mission of making Jesus Christ better known to all" (*EA* 2), as if the failure of Christianity to take root on Asian soil in the previous centuries was due to the dearth of Christian commitment to proclaiming Christ to the peoples of Asia. As regards the second reason, the Indian bishops admit that "a basic reason behind the failure of Christian mission efforts in the East [is that] the spiritual and mystical elements of Asian religions have been practically ignored."[90]

Initially, *Ecclesia in Asia* shows positive signs that it will consider this matter by reflecting on the Christian faith "in relation to the context in which it has to be proclaimed and professed in Asia today" (*EA* 4) and by insisting that the Church's evangelizing mission in

[88] Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 259.

[89] Prior, "Unfinished Encounter," 261.

[90] Cited at Phan, "Responses of the Asian Episcopal Conferences," 19.

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Asia is conditioned not only by the Asian Church's understanding of itself as Christ's community of disciples gathered around its pastors but also by "the social, political, religious, cultural and economic realities of Asia" (*EA* 5). Indeed, the Synod for Asia should have allowed more voice and participation to "those who [really] have daily contact with the extremely diversified realities of such an immense continent" (*EA* 5); its post-synodal document should have reflected faithfully their deepest questions, issues, and concerns. Yet, *Ecclesia in Asia* fails miserably in the most elementary requirement for coming up with an accurate discernment of one of the ills that afflicts Asian Christianity—its lack of Asianness. For while it is correct in perceiving that "despite her centuries-long presence and her many apostolic endeavors, the Church in many places *was* still considered as foreign to Asia and indeed *was* often associated in people's minds with the colonial powers" (*EA* 9; emphasis mine), it—as Phan sadly observes—"uses the past tense and fails to recognize that the foreignness of Christianity in Asia and the perception of its association with colonialism are *present* realities, and this not simply 'in many places' but in all parts of Asia."[91] This lack of Asianness is one of the bitter ironies of Asian Christianity: Christianity was born in Asia, moved westward until it arrived in Europe, and returned to its birthplace as a foreign religion, imported to Asia by its Western colonizers.[92]

Indeed, even if Christianity was born in Asia, for Felix Wilfred, "foreignness is one thing which characterizes all the local Churches in Asia," and this is not simply due to Christianity's foreign origins or because Christianity professes a different faith.

> The main reason why Christianity has been viewed as alien is because the local Churches in the countries of Asia have, by and large, kept themselves aloof from the mainstream of the life of the people, their history, struggles and dreams. They have failed to identify themselves

[91] Phan, "*Ecclesia in Asia*: Challenges for Asian Christianity," 218.

[92] Phan, "A Prophetic Church in the Service of the Reign of God: Dimensions of an Asian Ecclesiology», in *Reaping a Harvest from the Asian Soil. Towards an Asian Theology*, ed., V. Tirimanna (Bangalore, 2011), 193-194.

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> with the people, even though in terms of charity many praiseworthy services have been rendered.[93]

For the 1991 FABC-Office of Evangelization document, the Church, as a social institution, is seen as a foreign entity in its colonial beginnings, while other religions are deeply rooted in Asian cultures and traditions. And this is because

> [t]he Church remains foreign in its lifestyle, in its institutional structure, in its worship, in its western-trained leadership and its theology. Christian rituals remain formal, neither spontaneous nor particularly Asian. There is a gap between leaders and ordinary believers in the Church: *a fortiori* with members of other faiths. The Church has created a powerful priestly class with little lay participation. Seminary formation often alienates the seminarian from the people. Biblical, systematic and historical theology as taught are often unpastoral and unAsian.[94]

III. Conclusion

This paper delves deeper into Pope John Paul II's *Ecclesia in Asia*, identifying key theological and missiological omissions that leave the document incomplete.

First of all, we underlined the incomplete character of *Ecclesia in Asia*, arguing that it primarily reflects the papal perspective rather than a genuine dialogue with the Asian bishops. Furthermore, we noted the document's failure to adequately address key issues raised by the Asian bishops in the 1998 Synod for Asia, including the salvific significance of other religions. In spite of the FABC's long-standing regard for the place and role of the Asian religions in God's universal plan of salvation, the document deliberately sidesteps the issue of the salvific import of other religions, thereby undermining the Church's efforts to engage in meaningful interreligious dialogue. Additionally,

[93] F. Wilfred, "The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC): Orientations, Challenges and Impact," in *For All the Peoples of Asia. Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: Documents from 1970-1991*, I, eds., C. G. Arevalo and G. Rosales (Quezon City, 1992), xxiv.

[94] FABC-OE, no. 13, in FAPA I, 337.

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we highlighted the document's limited scope, particularly its failure to acknowledge the diverse contexts of Asian Churches and their unique approaches to evangelization. The unique cultural, religious, and social contexts of Asian Churches demand a diverse range of theological and pastoral responses and a unique way of implementing a vision of Asian Christianity tailored to the specific needs of each local Church. Lastly, we indicated that the point of divergence between the Roman Magisterium and the Asian bishops as regards the Asian Churches' mission is not on the "who" and the "what" but on the "how" of evangelization.

The Synod of Bishops was established by Pope Paul VI on September 15, 1965 as the Second Vatican Council was drawing to a close to promote episcopal collegiality. Canon 343 clearly states: "The function of the synod of Bishops is to discuss the matters proposed to it and set forth recommendations. It is not its function to settle matters or to draw up decrees, unless the Roman Pontiff has given it deliberative powers in certain cases; in this event, it rests with the Roman Pontiff to ratify the decisions of the synod."[95] That the Pope, from a canonical point of view, ends up not incorporating in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation all or many of the Propositions submitted to him by a Synod is still within the purview of his papal authority. The question, however, is: Why, *if* this happens, bother convoking a Synod if the Pope, at the end of a synodal process, chooses not to listen to the voices of his brother-bishops who are more knowledgeable about the context and situations of the Churches in a particular continent than he and those whom he delegates to draft the conclusions of a Synod?

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[95] The Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland, *The Code of Canon Law* (London: 1983), 59.

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Homecoming, *Pedro Calungsod: Patron for the Filipino Youth*, *A Critical Reappraisal of Karl Rahner's Theory of the "Anonymous Christian,"* and *Our Longing for Home*, as well as several articles. While currently serving as President of Saint Anthony Mary Claret College and Dean of the Institute for Consecrated Life in Asia, he teaches Systematic Theology at Loyola School of Theology and Institute for Consecrated Life in Asia, both in Quezon City, Philippines.

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